



Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences

PRESS RELEASE

Media Contact:

Tricia A. Bentley, Public Outreach Manager/PIO

Office: 713/796-6761 | Cell: 832/309-3868

Email: PIO@ifs.hctx.net

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Senator Cornyn Visits the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences ***Institute commended for sound scientific testing standards with no backlog of unprocessed cases***

"Each piece of evidence tested represents a person; a hope of awaited answers," said Debbie Smith.

U.S. Senator Cornyn recently visited the [Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences'](http://www.hctx.net/ifs) Forensic Genetics Laboratory to meet with Harris County leaders, local and statewide victims' advocates and Debbie Smith, for whom the [Debbie Smith Act of 2004](http://www.hctx.net/debbie-smith-act) is named. In the background, analysts and scientists worked diligently in the forensic genetics lab testing evidence from crimes. Around a conference room table, the group, sharing a unified vision and purpose, participated in a significant discussion regarding DNA testing and the victims of crimes.

The discussion opened with Senator Cornyn commending the Institute for its sound scientific testing standards and its ability to achieve and maintain no backlog of untested cases, a standard he said he hopes to set and share nationwide through his efforts in Washington, D.C.

"The Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences annually serves an average of 45 different agencies within Harris County and the surrounding area and completes testing on an average of 3,400 cases each year," said Luis A. Sanchez, Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences executive director and chief medical examiner. "We are able to accomplish this testing and be successful because of the collaborative support we receive from the Harris County Commissioner's Court, the Harris County Sheriff's Office, the Harris County District Attorney, the Harris County Public Defender, and the scientific and medical communities, such as the Texas Medical Center."

Institute of Forensic Sciences is a science-based, independent agency comprised of two distinct forensic services for the Harris County community – the medical examiner service and the crime laboratory service.

"The Institute truly is independent of any outside influence over the science and analysis of forensic evidence," said Harris County Judge Ed Emmett. "While it receives funding from Commissioners Court, we allow the Institute of Forensic Sciences to function with minimal oversight under the purview of the law and accreditation requirements."

As one of five forensic laboratories of the Institute of Forensic Sciences, the Forensic Genetics Laboratory analyzes evidence to provide unbiased and reliable results to the justice system and to the Harris County Medical Examiner. The laboratory is responsible for testing biological fluids, including blood, semen and saliva, and tissues to obtain DNA profiles that may link evidence found at crime scenes to individuals. The lab can scientifically identify a perpetrator of a crime and exonerate the innocent.

The group's discussion continued as Debbie Smith and victims' advocates shared their personal stories and experiences and their desire for increased federal funding for DNA testing.

Senator Cornyn is co-sponsoring the \$150 million reauthorization of the Debbie Smith Act and the Justice For All Act. The Justice For All Act provides grant funds to forensic DNA testing facilities to ensure sexual assault kits are processed accurately and efficiently and provides extended services to victims.

"Since 2005, the Institute has been the recipient of funds through the federal DNA backlog reduction program," said Roger Kahn, Ph. D., director of the Institutes' Forensic Genetics Laboratory. "With those funds, the Institute has been able to successfully eliminate backlogs and increase its capacity for forensic DNA analysis."

Today, the Institute uses grant money to look to the future, according to Dr. Kahn. Grant funds help the Institute prevent backlogs from occurring and keep the Forensic Genetics Laboratory on the cutting edge of the Forensic Genetics field.

"There's nothing sweeter than justice served," added Ms. Smith. "It is my hope that we will never have unanswered justice because of a lack of funding."

Dr. Sanchez added that the Institute of Forensic Sciences is dedicated to assisting the justice system by applying sound scientific principles to its testing and providing the highest quality of forensic services in an unbiased and timely manner with uncompromised integrity.

"I'm pleased to have participated in an open and honest discussion about the importance of forensic DNA testing and the difference it is making in fighting sexual assault and other crimes," said U.S. Senator John Cornyn. "I am continually impressed by the courage of those victims willing to share their stories, like Debbie Smith, and I'd like to thank the Harris County Institute for Forensic Sciences for hosting us."

About the Justice for All Act of 2013

The Justice For All Act of 2013 was introduced by Sen. Cornyn and seeks to ensure that the criminal justice system functions fairly. The bipartisan measure builds on the 2004 law by improving support services for crime victims and providing support to help state and local governments use DNA evidence to convict guilty offenders and exonerate the innocent. The legislation would establish an affirmative right to be informed of the rights under the Crime Victims' Rights Act and other key laws, and it takes several steps to make it easier for crime victims to assert those rights in court. It also reauthorizes the Debbie Smith DNA Backlog Reduction Act, which seeks to reduce the backlog of untested rape kits and other DNA evidence. That program is named after Debbie Smith, who waited years after being attacked before her rape kit was tested and the perpetrator was caught.

About the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences

The Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences is a science-based, independent operation comprised of two distinct forensic services for the Harris County community – the medical examiner service and the crime laboratory service. The Forensic Genetics Laboratory is one of the disciplines of the crime laboratory service. In addition, the Institute is a long-standing member of the Texas Medical Center. To learn more about the Institute of Forensic Sciences and to view a video describing the work of the Forensic Genetics Laboratory, visit: www.hctx.net/ifs.

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PHOTO CUTLINES

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Luis A. Sanchez, M.D., [Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences](http://www.hctx.net/ifs)' executive director and chief medical examiner (left) leads U.S. Senator John Cornyn (center) and a group of stakeholders, which includes Texas Medical Center president and CEO, Robert Robbins, M.D. (right), on a tour of the Institute's new Forensic Genetics Laboratory. Senator Cornyn recently visited the Institute of Forensic Science's Forensic Genetics Laboratory to meet with sexual assault victims, victim's advocates and Harris County leaders to

discuss forensic DNA testing in Harris County and the difference it is making in fighting sexual assault and other crimes. The Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences annually serves an average of 45 different agencies within Harris County and the surrounding area and completes testing on an average of 3,400 cases each year. To learn more, visit: www.hctx.net/ifs.

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Luis A. Sanchez, M.D., [Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences](http://www.hctx.net/ifs)' executive director and chief medical examiner (center), with Harris County Judge Ed Emmett (left) and Roger Kahn, Ph. D., director of the Institute's Forensic Genetics Laboratory (right), explains how the Institute operates independently of Commissioners Court oversight allowing the Institute to analyze evidence providing unbiased and reliable results to the justice system. U. S. Senator

Cornyn recently visited the Institute of Forensic Science's Forensic Genetics Laboratory to meet with sexual assault victims, victim's advocates and Harris County leaders to discuss forensic DNA testing in Harris County and the difference it is making in fighting sexual assault and other crimes. The Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences annually serves an average of 45 different agencies within Harris County and the surrounding area and completes testing on an average of 3,400 cases each year. To learn more, visit: www.hctx.net/ifs.

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